

## Gesture at Dura-Europos; A New Interpretation of the So-called 'scène énigmatique'

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### **Abstract:**

An enigmatic mythological scene is painted on the east wall of the pronaos of the temple of Bel in Dura-Europos.<sup>1</sup> The mural is not well known, and Mikhaïl Rostovtzeff suggested in 1938 that its interpretation was impossible, since it represented a single episode without context.<sup>2</sup> However, this paper argues that greater attention to the hand gestures depicted in the painting can shed light on its meaning. It has long been recognized that the hand gestures depicted in ancient art can have special significance. In addition to the symbolic representation of the gesturer's identity or frame of mind, gestures can also communicate action in a static scene, or draw attention to important details that might otherwise go unnoticed.<sup>3</sup> In the scene from the pronaos of the temple of Bel, the hand gestures not only provide clues to the identity of those depicted, they also animate the narration. Comparative evidence from other mural decoration in Dura-Europos, as well as sculpture and mosaics from other sites in the region, strengthen the possibility that the scene depicts the discovery of Ariadne on the island of Naxos by Dionysus.

**Keywords:** mural | Dura-Europos | anthropology | mythological interpretation

### **Article:**

An enigmatic mythological scene is painted on the east wall of the pronaos of the temple of Bel in Dura-Europos.<sup>1</sup> The mural is not well known, and Mikhaïl Rostovtzeff suggested in 1938 that its interpretation was impossible, since it represented a single episode without context.<sup>2</sup> However, this paper argues that greater attention to the hand gestures depicted in the painting can shed light on its meaning. It has long been recognized that the hand gestures depicted in ancient art can have special significance. In addition to the symbolic representation of the gesturer's identity or frame of mind, gestures can also communicate action in a static scene, or draw attention to important details that might otherwise go unnoticed.<sup>3</sup> In the scene from the pronaos of the temple of Bel, the hand gestures not only provide clues to the identity of those depicted, they also animate the narration. Comparative evidence from other mural decoration in Dura-Europos, as well as sculpture and mosaics from other sites in the region, strengthen the possibility that the scene depicts the discovery of Ariadne on the island of Naxos by Dionysus.

### **Description of the Painting**

The painting in question is located on the east wall of the pronaos, to the right of the door [PLATE XIX].<sup>4</sup> It shares a corner with the well-known painting of Julius Terentius pouring a libation while his troops look on, which is on the north wall [PLATE II], and its creation dates to roughly the same period as the Terentius scene: the first half of the third century AD.<sup>5</sup> The narrative is divided into two registers, each of which is framed with an 8-cm-wide red band. The upper portion of the top register is damaged, but the lower scene is fairly well preserved. This lower register features four figures in an outdoor setting made up of spindly trees. On the left, a person of uncertain gender sits on a large rock or pile of stones. This seated figure has a short, curly hairstyle and does not have facial hair. He (or she) wears a wide-sleeved tunic that extends to mid-thigh, with two parallel bands of color down the front. No shoes are worn. The left hand is held to the face, with the right arm drawn across the chest and supporting the left elbow. The right leg is extended, and the left bent at an angle.

Three men approach the seated figure from the right. The man in the center of this group is wearing what appears to be an animal skin, attached at the left shoulder with a brooch. The two men who flank him are nude. None wears shoes. All three have short hair and are clean-shaven. The man to the far right holds a club of some sort. In terms of gesture, the first man reaches out with both hands and seems to stride toward the seated figure. The two men behind him raise their right arms with their hands extended in the same direction.

Judging from the similar attributes and appearance, these same figures appear in the damaged upper register, though their positions are slightly different.<sup>6</sup> On the right, we see the same naked man, leaning on his crook, but now with his right arm bent and his hand held at chest level. He raises his right foot, as if he is stepping forward. Next to this figure is the man wearing the animal skin. He holds his left arm at his side; the right arm is not discernable. The third man is not visible and may be sitting or standing on the other side of the pile of rocks. Damage to the mural in this area makes it difficult to discern the details. The lower half of another person is also visible to the far left. Since the bottom portion of a tunic is visible, this may be the person sitting on the rocks in the lower register. Franz Cumont also tentatively identified a pedestal or altar to the far left of the scene, but its presence is not easily verified.<sup>7</sup>

### **Previous Interpretations of the Mythological Scene**

As stated in the introduction, the significance of these scenes is not immediately obvious. Cumont, who published a detailed description of the mural, proposed that the scenes represent episodes from an unfamiliar mythological story, possibly one in which three shepherds joyfully discover a young man who is apparently lost and overwhelmed by sadness.<sup>8</sup> Breasted also described the seated figure as sad, and he speculated that the attribute of the third man was a crutch and that he was a cripple.<sup>9</sup> Cumont argued instead that the third man was a shepherd holding his crook. In fact, Cumont identified all three standing men as shepherds, asserting that neither the garment of the middle figure nor the nudity of the other two would be out of the ordinary for shepherds in the Syrian desert.<sup>10</sup>

It was this conviction that the standing men were shepherds that led Cumont to reject Rostovtzeff's suggestion that the men might be candidates in a mystery cult, approaching the

seated deity for initiation.<sup>11</sup> Instead, Cumont drew attention to the similarities between this scene and Christian representations of the biblical episode when the angel of the Lord announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds.<sup>12</sup> Cumont then took this idea of shepherds reacting with joy to an announcement to suggest an alternate interpretation: namely that the scene represented the birth of the god Mithras (whom he saw as Dusares in the East). Cult reliefs depicting the birth of Mithras from a rock show that shepherds were present for this event. This interpretation would account for the natural setting, the rocks, and the reaction of the men. But Cumont was unhappy with the lack of a nimbus for the seated god. Also, he was unable to account for the apparent sadness which was expressed in the gesture of this same figure.<sup>13</sup>

A final suggestion for the significance of the scene does not involve a particular deity. In this interpretation, the person (purportedly) seated on the rocks in the upper register is an invalid. In the lower register, one of the three approaching men has taken the place of the invalid, giving him his good health and taking on his infirmity. The cured man is therefore expressing his joy and gratitude to his liberator in this lower scene, with the two men in the rear making the same joyful gesture with just one hand.<sup>14</sup>

While all three of these interpretations – shepherds reacting to joyful news, possibly the birth of Christ; shepherds witnessing the birth of Mithras; and the invalid who has been cured – are interesting, none is entirely satisfactory. The first two do not account for the purported sadness of the seated figure, and the third does not fit the pattern of temple decoration at Dura-Europos. Given the usual iconography of Durene temples, one would expect the painting to have some connection with a deity, a mythological scene, or ritual activities in the temple.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore preferable to find an explanation that would take this typical manner of decorating temples in Dura-Europos into account.

### **A New Interpretation of the Mythological Scene**

As explained above, in his suggestions for the subject matter of the mythological scene, Cumont was unable to account for the sadness of the seated figure. This assumption about the emotional state of the seated figure relies on the hand gestures. While such a gesture certainly could communicate sadness, it is also an arm position that is associated almost exclusively with representations of women. In other words, it could identify the figure as female. A similar gesture, known as the “Pudicitia” gesture, is seen in the funerary sculpture from Rome, where it had connotations of the modesty and virtue of a respectable Roman matron.<sup>16</sup> The most striking regional evidence for a correlation between this particular gesture and gender comes from the neighboring city of Palmyra. A popular style of funerary sculpture in Palmyra during the first three centuries AD was the bust-length relief portrait. In a sample of 220 bust-length portraits that depict females, 158 examples (over 70 percent) show the woman with either the right or left arm raised. The gesture is clearly associated with women.<sup>17</sup> Although not as copious as the examples from Palmyra, terracotta plaques from Dura-Europos itself depict women holding their arms in a similar manner: in two examples, the women hold their right hands facing outward and they raise their left hands, possibly holding the edge of the cloak.<sup>18</sup> A bust of a woman on a terracotta medallion, with her left hand brought to chin level, provides additional evidence for the association of this gesture with women at Dura-Europos.<sup>19</sup>

Two potential objections to the identification of the seated figure as a woman are her short hairstyle and the decorative bands on her tunic, which look like *clavi*. However, similar hairstyles and costume adornment also appear in neighboring Palmyra. Several of the younger girls, depicted in smaller scale above the shoulder of the parent in the bust-length reliefs from Palmyra, have a similar short hairdo.<sup>20</sup> In addition, a number of women depicted in the Palmyrene funerary sculpture wear tunics adorned with two vertical embroidered bands.<sup>21</sup>

Turning our attention to the three standing figures, the gestures of the two men standing behind the first man, with their right hands raised and extended, resemble the adulation gesture seen on the adjacent Terentius painting. But the gesture of the first man, with both arms extended toward the seated figure, is not the usual gesture of adoration (although two raised hands are sometimes used, they are not depicted in such a manner, with the hands held horizontally). Cumont described this first man as striding toward the seated figure, as if to embrace him.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the gesture could also signify a very enthusiastic welcome. The gestures of the two men in the rear may be helpful in determining the significance of the scene. Comparative evidence from the synagogue in Dura-Europos suggests that their gestures may have a welcoming connotation.

The use of this gesture to indicate a greeting appears on the west wall of the synagogue, in the scene depicting the arrival of Mordecai to the citadel of Susa [PLATE X]. In this scene, Ahasuerus, the Persian king, is rewarding Mordecai for his loyalty. Mordecai is wearing the royal garments and rides through the city on the king's royal horse.<sup>23</sup> A group of men stands to the right of Mordecai, facing him as he approaches; they all raise their right hands. Warren Moon has drawn attention to the similarity between this scene and that of a traditional Roman imperial *adventus*, or triumphant entry into the city.<sup>24</sup> There is no mention of a welcoming crowd in the biblical version of the story, so the interpretation of their gesture is not completely straightforward. However, it seems clear that they are not worshipping Mordecai, but rather acclaiming or welcoming him.<sup>25</sup>

The gesture of Esther, who sits on the throne next to Ahasuerus, to the right of the previous scene, is quite striking. She has her right arm drawn across her body and her left hand raised to her face, in a manner similar to the enigmatic figure in the mythological scene in the temple of Bel. This depiction of Esther provides additional, local evidence for the association of this gesture with women.

If the seated figure is a woman, and if the approaching men are greeting her, the scene may be an illustration of Dionysus discovering Ariadne on the island of Naxos. This interpretation would explain why a woman would be sitting alone in such a setting, seemingly waiting for someone or something. In addition, of the three men approaching her, the central one could represent Dionysus. Although he lacks some of his usual attributes, he is wearing a panther skin. A mosaic from Sarrin provides comparative evidence for Dionysus wearing such a costume.<sup>26</sup> There are also several examples that postdate the painting in Dura-Europos. In an Egyptian tapestry from the fourth century, showing the triumph of Dionysus, Dionysus is clearly wearing the panther skin (though in this case, other items of clothing as well).<sup>27</sup> In another depiction of the "Triumph of Dionysus," this time on a pyxis from the sixth century, he is again wearing the panther skin.<sup>28</sup> Finally, the nudity of the other two men supports the identification of the central figure as Dionysus, because the cortege of Dionysus is often represented in such a state.<sup>29</sup>

Dionysus is a popular mythological figure in the Roman East, and scenes from his life appear regularly in mosaics.<sup>30</sup> The same mythological episode, the discovery of Ariadne by Dionysus, is illustrated in a floor mosaic now in the Miho Museum in Kyoto, Japan [PLATE XX]. In this mosaic, Ariadne reclines, facing away from the three men who approach her. She looks off into the distance, with her left hand brought to her face. To her right are three men, identified in the inscriptions as Maron, Dionysus, and a satyr. Note that Maron holds a shepherd's crook. Although not entirely nude, Maron is certainly not wearing a lot of clothes.<sup>31</sup> The surviving upper half of the satyr suggests that he is also nude. Another mosaic depicting the same mythological episode survives at Chania, Crete (dated to the third century AD). This scene likewise features three men (Dionysus, an old man, presumably Maron, and a satyr) with the reclining Ariadne. The imagery in these mosaics is not identical to that in the temple of Bel at Dura-Europos, but there are striking similarities: a woman alone in a natural setting, approached by three men (in various states of undress), one of whom carries a crook. The same number of participants appears in the various renditions of the scene, and Dionysus always stands in the middle.

The drinking contest between Dionysus and Heracles was also popular in the Roman Near East.<sup>32</sup> The episode is featured in a mosaic found in "the House of the Drinking Contest" in Antioch.<sup>33</sup> Two more examples of the same scene are seen in Shahba-Philippopolis, and in a villa in Sepphoris.<sup>34</sup> At Palmyra, Dionysus is depicted on a fresco from a hypogeum, unfortunately no longer accessible, in the southwest necropolis: it shows the god holding a cup, while reclining below grapes.<sup>35</sup> These images show not only that various episodes from the life of Dionysus were common knowledge in the region, but also that he was part of the artistic repertoire in the Near East.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, it is surprising not only that Dionysus does not figure more prominently in Dura-Europos, but also that this scene would represent the only illustration of Greek mythology in the wall paintings in the city.<sup>37</sup>

Some aspects of the painting, however, do not fit easily with an interpretation of it as showing Dionysus' discovery of Ariadne. For example, Cumont doubted that the seated figure was divine because of the lack of a nimbus; the same would make identification of the figure in the panther skin as Dionysus problematic. One would also expect Dionysus to be rendered in a larger scale. However, an explanation for these oversights may rest with the source of the image. Bowersock has recently argued that the inspiration for mythological scenes in the late antique mosaics in the Near East came not from books, but rather from mime: "It is worth asking now whether we may be seeing in the mythological mosaics generally some kind of reflection of the immensely popular mime theater of late antiquity. Entertainment of this kind frequently exploited myth and represented gods or legendary figures."<sup>38</sup> Dionysus is not nimbate in the mosaics from Sepphoris or Antioch, and may not have been nimbate in the theatrical representations. In addition, in another painting from the temple of Bel, this one on the north wall of the pronaos, Cumont identified a male figure as Heracles because of his attribute, the club.<sup>39</sup> There is no mention of the fact that he lacks a nimbus and is the same size as the unidentified figure to his right.

A contemporary inscription in the Dolicheneum provides additional evidence for interest in Dionysus in Dura-Europos. This inscription records a series of liturgical invocations to Dionysus.<sup>40</sup> Thus, we clearly have a group who worshiped this deity in the city in the early third

century AD. The connection between the identity of this group and the author of the mythological scene is less straightforward, since only soldiers used the Dolicheneum.<sup>41</sup> The same was not true at the temple of Bel, where inscriptions and graffiti provide evidence of a mixed population of worshipers,<sup>42</sup> but the fact that it is directly adjacent to the fresco of the sacrifice of the military tribune would of course make a military context also for the “enigmatic scene” possible. This ambiguity with regard to the individual(s) who commissioned the painting in the temple of Bel is regrettable. The commissioning of mural decoration in the temples clearly had ramifications for the social identity of the patron, and one of local origin would be significant for our understanding of cultural and religious identity in the city.<sup>43</sup>

The above evidence suggests that the illustration of a mythological episode from the life of Dionysus would not be entirely unusual at Dura-Europos. However, such a scene is surprising in the temple of Bel. Although mythological scenes adorn the walls of the synagogue and the Christian house church, the walls of the temple of Bel are decorated primarily with images of deities and scenes of ritual activity.<sup>44</sup> In the painting depicting Konon and his family on the south wall of the naos, the priests offer incense, while the family members show their reverence by raising their right hands. On the south wall of the pronaos, Lysias, Apollodorus, and Zenodotus, who are depicted between spiral columns, again represent the act of sacrifice by holding their right hands over the incense burners. Julius Terentius, the tribune of the 20th Palmyrene cohort, supplies a third example of the sacrificial act on the north wall of the pronaos. The men standing behind him, presumably from his cohort, raise their right hands toward the three deities (or deified emperors) in the corner and to the Tyches of Dura-Europos and Palmyra.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to the subject matter, the potential difference in the intended function of the mythological scene is even more jarring. As Rostovtzeff remarked when discussing the scenes from the synagogue: “If they impress one as essentially different from the paintings of pagan Dura, this is due not to a difference in style, but ... to the fact that their purpose was different.”<sup>46</sup> This difference between the two types of wall decoration is best illustrated by focusing on the gestures. There are two primary gestures in the sacrificial scenes from the temple of Bel: the first involves holding the right hand above an incense burner, placing incense into the flame as an offering to the deity; and the second is the right hand raised or cupped in front of the body to show adulation toward the deity or deities. In 1924, Breasted commented on the difference between the adulation gesture seen in the Terentius painting, with the arm fully extended, and that seen in the painting of Konon and his family adorning the south wall of the naos. Contrary to the soldiers, the members of Konon’s family hold their right hands, palm outward, in front of the chest. Breasted argued that it was essentially the same gesture in both paintings; the difference was in the location of the deity: “Why should the arms of the worshipers in the scene of the tribune be extended in worship toward the left, and in the great painting directly toward the observer? Because in both cases the direction depicted is that of the images of the gods: in the first case on the wall, in the second in the shrine in the same room.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, the gestures did more than represent the action; they performed it. As Wharton says, “the frescoes of the naos are not *ornamental*, as in the triclinium of a Roman house, but *active*.”<sup>48</sup>

In contrast to the votive function of the gestures in the ritual scenes, the gestures in the enigmatic mythological scene merely aid in the decipherment of the narrative. There is little to suggest that the action in the scene had any relation to activities in the pronaos itself. In this way, the

mythological scene has much more in common with the type of decoration seen in the synagogue or the Christian church, where the artists who painted the scenes in the synagogue used static scenes to narrate their stories.<sup>49</sup> The paintings also date from roughly the same period: the first half of the third century. It is possible therefore that the mythological scene provides evidence of shared workshops, or at least shared ideas, in the adornment of religious edifices in Dura-Europos in the third century AD.<sup>50</sup>

A reference to Dionysus in a temple already dedicated to other gods would not be revolutionary in Dura-Europos; it was commonplace to worship a number of deities in the same temple.<sup>51</sup> Nor would it be unusual to have a painting added at this late date in the life of the temple. We know that the temples were decorated in a piecemeal fashion.<sup>52</sup> As mentioned above, although the mythological scene is unusual, the decorative choice provides an interesting connection between the temple and the synagogue or the Christian church during this period at Dura-Europos. However, if Bowersock is correct, and the inspiration for these scenes came from mime, its presence also shows the involvement of Dura-Europos in the cultural activities of the region. Even more than regional associations, the painting of Dionysus shows a connection in the pagan cult of Dura-Europos to the city of Rome at a time when others have argued that its peripheral nature was far more important.<sup>53</sup>

## Notes

**1** Yale University Art Gallery, 1932.1205.

**2** Rostovtzeff (1938a) 121.

**3** Brilliant (1963); cf. Aldrete (1999) for function of gesture in oratory and theater; cf. Corbeill (2004) for gesture in ritual activities; for communication of action in a ritual scene, cf. Dirven (2008); cf. Boatwright (2005) 295–304, for the suggestion that the gesture of mother pointing to son emphasized importance of family.

**4** The mural is about 95 cm long. The lower register is about 42 cm high, not including the 8-cm red band that frames it at the top and bottom. About 40 cm of the upper register remains at its highest point, cf. Cumont (1926) 84–6.

**5** Rostovtzeff (1938a) 74.

**6** Cumont (1926) 86.

**7** Ibid. 87.

**8** Ibid.

**9** Breasted (1924) 102.

**10** Cumont (1926) 86.

**11** Ibid. 87.

**12** Ibid. 88; Millett, who worked with Cumont on the connections to Christian iconography, suggested that all four were shepherds, and the seated figure was expressing his astonishment at joyful news. See Millett (1926) 150.

**13** Cumont (1926) 89.

**14** Provided in personal correspondence to Cumont from Fr. de Jerphanion, see Cumont (1926) 484.

**15** Rostovtzeff (1938a) 76: “The above evidence shows that there existed at Dura as early as the first century AD a traditional manner of decorating temples. Cult figures, scenes of sacrifice, and occasional mythological pictures illustrating some episode in the story of the god were the constituent parts of this traditional scheme.”

**16** Kleiner (1977) 162.

**17** Two exceptions to this association of the gesture with women: The first is in Beirut: Lagrange (1902) 94. The second is on a relief portrait in the Sackler Museum of Art at Harvard University (1998.3). The child who stands behind the shoulder of the father in the portrait appears to be male, and yet he holds a bunch of grapes to his chest with his raised left arm. It is an unusual gesture for children as well.

**18** Downey (2003) 50–1, figs 1–2.

**19** Ibid. 59–60, fig. 14.

**20** E.g. Sadurska and Bounni (1994) fig. 159: depiction of daughter above left shoulder of parent; she has short hair and also wears a short-sleeved tunic with two bands running down the front. Cf. Pierson (1984).

**21** E.g. Sadurska and Bounni (1994) fig. 154 and fig. 202; e.g. Louvre AO 14925; cf. Dentzer-Feydy and Teixidor (1993) 72.

**22** Cumont (1926) 85.

**23** Esther 6:11.

**24** Moon (1992) 594; cf. Brilliant (1963) 174–5, figs 4.23–4.34.

**25** Cf. Goodenough (1964) 183, who thought that the men represented heavenly beings or angels, “marked as such by their size and dress and by their being unrealistic and stiff ...” As for their gesture – Goodenough interpreted their uplifted hands as indicating divine blessing rather than adulation. In response to this, see Weitzman (1990) 115.



- 26** Balty (1990); ead. (1991); also, Bowersock (2006) fig. 2.12.
- 27** Metropolitan Museum (90.5.873).
- 28** Metropolitan Museum (17.190.56).
- 29** Bowersock (2006) 46.
- 30** Ibid. 39; see also id. (1990) 41–53.
- 31** Miho Museum, Kyoto, Japan (SF03.021).
- 32** Worcester Art Museum 1933.36: floor mosaic of the “Drinking Contest of Herakles and Dionysus,” Antioch, Atrium House, early second century AD.
- 33** Princeton Art Museum y1965–216; cf. Dunbabin (1999) fig. 167.
- 34** Meyers et al. (1987); Bowersock (2006) 39, fig. 2.5.
- 35** Ingholt (1932) pl. IV.
- 36** Dunbabin (2008) 203.
- 37** Perkins (1973) 34.
- 38** Bowersock (2006) 54. Also inexplicable is the resemblance of Maron’s “crook” to a club. It brings to mind the club of Heracles, and one wonders if it represents a blending of two popular stories associated with Dionysus: the drinking contest with Heracles and the discovery of Ariadne.
- 39** Cumont (1926) 118.
- 40** Porter (1948).
- 41** Perkins (1973) 27.
- 42** Downey (1988a) 108.
- 43** Elsner (2007b) 266: “The consistent insistence on inscription in all the images points to a strong assertion of personal and religious identity on the part of the dedicators (and even, in one case, the artist).” Though see the argument by Wharton (1995) 37: “In many of the ancient cults of the Near East only deities and priests were admitted to the inner sanctuary. In consequence, it seems unlikely that the fresco in the naos of the Temple of Bel was intended as a public statement. More probably its action was votive.”
- 44** Elsner (2007b) 260: “one is struck by how many images represent the act of sacrifice.”

**45** Cf. e.g. Kaizer (2006).

**46** Rostovtzeff (1938a) 121.

**47** Breasted (1924) 100.

**48** Wharton (1995) 61 (emphasis is hers).

**49** Rostovtzeff (1938a) 121.

**50** Wharton (1995) 60–1; see also Jensen (1999) 186, where he discusses Wharton’s ideas and concurs: “Thus Jews, Christians, and polytheists shared a particular artistic style and iconographic approach, albeit for three very different kinds of buildings serving three very different religious communities.”

**51** A point made most recently by Kaizer (2009b) 158–9.

**52** Rostovtzeff (1938a) 76.

**53** If the scene is of Dionysus and Ariadne, this would go against Elsner (2007b) 266, who argued that images all imply “a certain element of religious affiliation to broadly local gods, as opposed to, say, the imperial cult or deities directly sponsored by the Roman establishment elsewhere in the empire. In this sense they establish and affirm peripherality, or the centrality of local cult and identity, in a way that ignores the Roman empire and the distant imperial center.”